

Defending Literature

Read the following five excerpts addressing the complexities of and justification for literature:

1. **The Writer's Relief Staff of the *Huffington Post* consider the difference between literary and mainstream novels:**

"If your novel doesn't fall into the genre fiction categories, don't automatically assume it's literary fiction. Literary fiction tends to focus on complex issues and the beauty of the writing itself, and your novel may rely more on action, which is the tendency of mainstream fiction. So how do you know if your novel is literary or mainstream, and how best to move forward if your book doesn't perfectly match the definition of either category?

Think of literary fiction as a manifesto of sorts—it's driven by the ideas, themes, and concerns of the novelist, often producing a narrative that is at times controversial. The style of prose is emphasized in literary fiction, whereas a writer of mainstream fiction will often forego stylistic writing in order to get to the meat of the story. The plot isn't the main focus in literary fiction; rather, the history, social issues, and character developments that are a part of the story take precedence. Literary fiction for new writers may match that of mainstream fiction, while the word count for seasoned novelists can fall anywhere between 40,000 and 120,000 words"

2. ***Huffington Post* critic Carol Hoenig examines what recent research on reading practices say about our society:**

A new report doesn't bode well for books. According to an Associated Press-Ipsos poll released recently, one in four adults read not a single book last year, which explains the significant drop in book sales over the last few years, but doesn't explain why superstores, like Barnes & Noble and Borders, continue to expand.

There are many reasons why people don't read as they once did. The major reason is that there is a feast for the eyes without the need for settling down and focusing on the written word.

Television provides a variety of images, video games deliver bright colors and packed action, and the Internet gives the power of immediacy. Books are something else all together--they are a quiet entertainment and we are no longer raised to know how to be "quiet."

But a book demands more from us. When one opens a book, one brings his or her experiences and knowledge, or hunger for knowledge, to the work and a new world can unfold with each turning page. Unfortunately, just like most media, there is a lot of fast food for the mind being published and people think that reading such commercial dribble keeps them in the know. On one level it does, but it is knowledge that serves no useful purpose. For publishers, it's a moneymaker because we are a fast food society unwilling to take time to digest sustenance.

3. **Harold Bloom, American literary critic and Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, presents his argument for reading literature from the canon:**

"The defense of the Western Canon is in no way a defense of the West or a nationalist enterprise. . . . The greatest enemies of aesthetic and cognitive standards are purported defenders who blather to us about moral and political values in literature. We do not live by the ethics of the *Iliad*, or by the politics of Plato. Those who teach interpretation have more in common with the Sophists than with Socrates. What can we expect Shakespeare to do for our semi-ruined society, since the function of Shakespearean drama has so little to do with civic virtue or social justice?"

4. New York writer and cultural critic Lee Siegel presents his argument towards the intentional reading:

Americans have always felt uncomfortable about any cultural activity that does not lead to concrete results. "He that wastes idly a groat's worth of his time per day, one day with another, wastes the privilege of using one hundred pounds each day": though Benjamin Franklin was fairly indifferent to money himself, the sentiment he expressed in that bit of advice became a hallmark of the national character. Idleness is still anathema in American life. (Kim Kardashian, who has restlessly turned her idle time into a profitable industry, is a Puritan at heart.) And the active daydream of writing and reading fiction is idleness in its purest state, neither promising nor leading to any practical or concrete result. From the didactic McGuffey Readers that lasted from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century to William Bennett's "Book of Virtues" in our own time (a liberal response, "A Call to Character" by Colin Greer and Herbert Kohl, was published a few years later), the American impulse to make room for literature by harnessing it to a socially useful purpose has taken many forms. You might even say that the two archetypal fictional American characters, Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, invented by the country's most scathing satirist, are essentially arguments for the superiority of idleness over any morally, socially or financially useful American activity.

5. New York Times writer Rachel Donado recalls the "Canon Wars" of the 1980s when conservative and liberal scholars battled over what counts as literature:

Debates over what an educated person should know go back to the 19th century in America, when teaching any literature beyond the Greek and Roman classics was still controversial. But today, there's widespread concern that the humanities are losing ground — as well as intellectual cachet, students and financing — to the hard sciences on the one hand and business on the other...

On some campuses, "the main area of conflict is trying to make sure that the humanities get adequate funding from the central administration," Nussbaum wrote in an e-mail message, adding, "Our nation, like most nations of the world, is devaluing the humanities vis-à-vis science and technology, so constant vigilance is required lest these disciplines be cut"...

But when college costs run as high as \$50,000 a year, it's harder to ignore questions like "What will this major do for my career prospects?"... The high cost of college today exacerbates a utilitarian strain that's always made it hard for the liberal arts to make a case for themselves in practical-minded America.

Initial Thoughts:

What are your thoughts about reading in the 21st century?

As a student with experience in academic focused reading, what are your thoughts about the quotes provided above? Do you agree? Disagree? Why? Do you have differing or new points of view?

Focused Research Question:

Defend and/or* refute the concept of a literary canon comprised of works that meet academic notions of literary merit.

Guiding questions/ideas as a starting point for developing your focus:

Examine the role of books in defining and/or transmitting our culture.

Is there a specificity for the types of books? Is there value in reading the canon? What merits a literary work for academic study?

Should we abandon (or radically expand) the canon? How should the reading of literature and the selections of literary works...

To what degree should high schools and colleges see it as their mission to expose students to classical works, to contemporary works, to multicultural works?

In what ways might notions of literary merit need to evolve for today's society?

Student Requirement:

For your research focus, you will find, print, read, and annotate a minimum of four scholarly articles to develop your answer to the research question. After reading and annotating the articles, you will then synthesize the information and incorporate it into a coherent, well-developed constructed essay that develops a position on the research question. Use the research to support and defend your reasoning. *You may choose to present and defend one side to the argument or both sides.

- 4 secondary sources of scholarly research (each must have a credible author)
- Use 3rd person
- Central Claim
- Transitions
- Formal writing
- Works cited
- 2-4 typewritten pages
- MLA rules
- ALL sources MUST have a credible author
- Minimum 5 quotes from the research with lead ins
- Your research must be documented parenthetically
- No material from sparknotes, cliff's notes, novelguide, Wikipedia, Shmoop, blogs, unpublished authors, etc., will NOT be allowed. Credentials must be known.
- Formal Language, advanced diction, varied sentence structure

Important Dates:

4/21 DUE all research articles annotated

4/27 DUE Claim, written text at least two pages with quotes, lead-ins, parenthetical citations

5/4 DUE Final essay with works cited
Submit to turnitin.com

